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ABSTRACT

In response to a position paper that called upon the ministry of education in each Canadian province to provide a balanced selection to offerings on the province's authorized list of language arts textbooks, several ministries claimed that a balanced approach to teaching reading was being followed. A letter received from Alberta Education even stated that all of the whole-language programs approved for use in that province included explicit instruction in phonics (particularly the Journeys, Networks, and Impressions programs). Yet many Canadian parents, columnists, and academics believe otherwise, and the Reading and Literacy Institute of Alberta has called for more phonics instruction in the schools. The phonics and phonemic awareness exercises in such programs as the one developed by B. A. Blachman are effective in helping children to become successful readers and should be part of all beginning reading programs. Phonics instruction in the whole language programs provides children with one additional context clue (sound) that they then can employ together with other context clues, while phonics instruction in phonemic awareness programs offers children an important primary strategy for word identification that can be employed by itself. Ministries of education should take the following actions: (1) change curriculum guidelines to include the need for phonemic awareness training; (2) encourage Canadian textbook publishers to supplement their whole-language programs with phonemic awareness training exercises; (3) encourage teacher education institutions to provide prospective teachers with information on phonemic awareness training; and (4) encourage classroom teachers to use phonemic awareness exercises during normal reading instruction. (Contains 61 references.) (RS)

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Reply to the Ministries' Reactions to the Canadian Psychological Association's Position Paper on Beginning Reading Instruction

Reply to the Ministries' Reactions
to the Canadian Psychological Association's Position Paper
on Beginning Reading Instruction

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The recommendations in this reply were approved
by the Board of Directors of the
Canadian Psychological Association in June, 1994.

Background

In November 1992 the Board of Directors of the Canadian Psychological Association approved a position paper that called upon the ministry (department) of education in each province to provide a balanced selection of offerings on the province's authorized list of Language Arts (reading) textbooks. This call for balance meant that "both bottom-up, code-emphasis programs, as well as top-down, meaning-emphasis programs, should appear on the lists of approved textbook materials" (Simner, 1993). The call was prompted by evidence, summarized in the paper, which showed that in the majority of provinces the dominant approach to reading instruction was based on a top-down, whole-language, philosophy which deemphasizes the importance of phonics. The Board's concern over this matter stemmed from further evidence, also summarized in the paper, which showed that such an approach may not be appropriate for all children and that for some children, in particular, those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who lack prerequisite literacy skills, it may even lead to serious reading problems.

The paper was mailed to a number of professional organizations, educational reform advocacy groups, media representatives, as well as to the ministry of education in each province. Although the Board's concern received very favorable coverage in the press (Hatton, 1993, Nikiforuk, 1993a, 1993c), on television (Rehak, 1993), and was endorsed by groups that ranged from parent/teacher organizations (e.g., Hastings County Chapter of the Organization for Quality Education) to major professional associations (e.g., Canadian Association of School Psychologists), this concern did not seem to be shared by the ministries themselves. Of the eight ministries that responded to the paper, seven claimed that a balanced approach to teaching reading was being followed and that teachers were being encouraged to use a variety of techniques in the classroom. In fact, five of the ministries specifically noted in their responses that phonics is included among these techniques. The letter received from Alberta Education even stated that all of the whole-language programs approved for use in that province "include explicit instruction in phonics" and to illustrate this point the letter contained several pages from the teacher's manuals for three of the programs (Impressions, Journeys, and Networks).

If the ministries' claims are correct and phonics is not deemphasized in whole-language but, instead, forms an integral part of whole-language beginning reading instruction why then are there so many Canadian parents, columnists, and academics who believe otherwise (e.g., Cumming, 1992; Herman, 1993; Nikiforuk, 1994; Stanovich, 1993/94; Vanderwolf, 1991; Willows, 1991, 1992; Young & Quinn, 1993)? Also, why are there Canadian school boards and principals who, according to some reports, flatly refuse to allow teachers to use phonics materials in the classroom (Hatton, 1993), and why are there letters to the editor as well as commentaries from Canadian teachers who feel threatened when they employ these materials (Beek, 1990; Coad, 1994; Walker, 1992)?

Furthermore, why did the Reading and Literacy Institute of Alberta recently issue a document that called for more phonics instruction in the schools (Haswell, 1993) and why was this call praised in the Globe and Mail (Nikiforuk, 1993b)?

Perhaps the issue is not so much whether phonics instruction is an integral part of whole-language but whether the level of phonics instruction in whole-language is compatible with the needs of many beginning readers. The purpose of this reply is to address this issue. First we will describe the phonics exercises in the phonemic awareness training programs that are now known to be quite effective in helping children to become successful readers and, therefore, are the exercises that many have argued should be part of all beginning reading programs (e.g., Blachman, 1991; Bradley & Bryant, 1985; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1991;, Cunningham, 1990; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Hatcher, Hulme, & Ellis, 1994; Leong, 1991; Liberman, Shankweiler, & Liberman, 1989; Lundberg, Frost, & Petersen, 1988; Stanovich, 1986, 1993/94; Stahl, 1992; Stahl, Osborn, & Lehr, 1990; Truch, 1991; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1987; Williams, 1980; Yopp, 1992). Next we will describe the phonics exercises in the lesson plans from the teachers manuals for the three whole-language programs referred to in the letter from Alberta Education. By drawing attention to the differences in these two sets of exercises, the distinction between what the provinces are providing and what the public are demanding should become clear.

Introductory Phonics in Phonemic Awareness Training Programs

The term phonemic awareness refers to the ability to recognize that a spoken word consists of a sequence of sounds (Ball & Blachman, 1988). The goal of phonemic awareness training is to provide children with phonemic segmentation skills that they can later draw upon when they learn to decode words in printed matter. Hence, this training serves as preparation for the eventual acquisition of decoding, or sounding out skills, which children normally are taught to use as an important strategy, although not as a sole strategy, in the more traditional beginning reading programs to help them identify unfamiliar words (for a detailed description of these programs see Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 1990, Chapt. 5).

To achieve this goal children are introduced over periods that range from several weeks to several months, to the beginning, middle, and final sounds in words through a series of progressively more challenging exercises. To simplify the exercises, from the start words are presented orally or in the form of pictures, not in the form of letters. Letters are introduced either after the children have successfully mastered the process of phonemic segmentation or gradually, and in limited numbers, while the children are mastering this process. This point is important because the majority of children who are at risk for reading failure have only a limited command of the alphabet (Simner, 1983). To expect these children to master phonemic segmentation and at the same time to master the

alphabet would be, as Roberts (1975) has suggested, to complicate rather than to facilitate learning.

While the specific training approach varies somewhat from program to program, to illustrate the nature of this approach we have chosen to review the program developed by Blachman (Ball and Blachman, 1988, 1991; Blachman, 1984, 1991) because this program is both well researched and contains a number of features that are common to most other phonemic awareness training programs. In the Blachman program children gather in small groups four times each week in sessions that last approximately 20 minutes. During each session the children engage in three sets of activities that take place in a prescribed order and contain a variety of exercises designed to ensure that the children gradually become skilled in the process of phonemic segmentation. The first set of activities consists of "Say-It-And-Move-It" exercises. At the start of the exercises the children receive a number of buttons or plastic counters and the teacher slowly pronounces a single isolated sound either one time or several times. The number of buttons the children receive at the onset of the session corresponds with the number of sounds employed during that session. As the teacher pronounces the sound the children also pronounce the sound and, at the same time, place one button on a line for each sound they hear.

The teacher then moves from isolated sounds to one- two- or three-phoneme words. In the case of the two- or three-phoneme words, once all the buttons are on line the children are taught to run their fingers across the line and to repeat the phonemes in blended fashion. During the three-phoneme exercises the children gradually build words by pronouncing the first phoneme and then by blending that phoneme with the next. The resulting two-phoneme blend is subsequently combined with the final phoneme. The children are also taught how to dismantle or breakdown words by reversing this process.

To provide the children with additional experiences in segmentation, during the next set of activities the children are exposed to rhyming exercises modeled after the work of Bradley and Bryant (1985). These exercises are intended to give children further opportunities to focus on beginning, middle, and final sounds by having them categorize words based on common sound properties. For instance, to teach final sounds the children might listen to the words HEN and PEN and the teacher might ask "Are these words alike because both start with the same sound or because both end with the same sound?" Alternatively, the children might be shown an array of cards with pictures of a HAT, CAT, RAT, and MAN. Here the children would be asked to point to the one picture whose object has a different final sound or to the other pictures whose objects have the same final sound. To teach middle sounds, the children might listen to, and then say, three words that rhyme (e.g., HAT, MAT, RAT) along with a fourth non-rhyming word that shares the same final sound as the other three but not the same middle sound (e.g., COT). Since all four words cannot be categorized as the same based on their beginning sound, and all four

words have the same final sound, the children are led to discover that the one word that sounds different (COT) must be different because of the middle sound.

The goal of the final set of activities in the Blachman program is to have children associate letter sounds with letter shapes. To accomplish this goal the children are taught the sounds for nine letters (a, b, f, i, m, r, s, t, u) chosen because of the fairly large number of consonant-vowel-consonant words that these letters generate. To establish the sound/shape associations children engage in only one sound/shape activity during a given session. Here the teacher might ask the children to trace the letter while making that letter's sound or the teacher might show them the letter on a flash card. Also, as the children's sound/shape vocabulary increases, the teacher might have them play games such as bingo where the children are asked to cover the appropriate letter when the teacher pronounces a given sound. Additional Say-It-And-Move-It exercises are then introduced in which the children are shown how to segment real words such as MAN or FAT with buttons or tiles each of which contains a letter whose sound the children already have mastered.

Introductory Phonics in Whole-Language Programs

To compare the phonics exercises described above with the phonics exercises in whole-language, as mentioned earlier, we selected for review the Impressions, Journeys, and Networks programs. These programs were chosen because they are among the most popular programs in Canada, as witnessed by the fact that they appear on the approved lists issued by the majority of the provinces (Simner, 1993) and because, according to the letter we received from Alberta Education, all are said to include explicit instruction in phonics. Indeed, according to the teacher's manuals, all three programs do have a phonics component. In Networks (McInnes, et al, 1987), of the 63 lesson plans that comprise the first year's work, 20 plans contain phonics exercises. In both Impressions (Booth, Booth, Pauli, & Phenix, 1984) and Journeys (Tuinman, 1984) phonics exercises appear in almost every lesson plan throughout the first year of instruction.

Despite this emphasis on phonics, however, it is important to note that the reason for teaching phonics in whole-language differs considerably from the reason for teaching phonics in phonemic awareness training programs. As mentioned above, in phonemic awareness programs phonics is taught with the aim of preparing children to use decoding, or sounding out, as an important strategy in word identification. In whole language, however, because decoding is considered to be of only secondary importance, phonics is taught as a subsidiary rather than as a primary skill (Froese, 1990). In Networks, for instance, phonics is said to be "an effective strategy when used in concert with all other strategies. Used on isolate words, phonics is of limited value, since the word produced by

'sounding out' must still be tested in the context of the sentence and the selection as a whole" (McInnes, et al., 1987, p. 30). A similar message appears in Impressions: "When reading, children predict, using a variety of cues. The context provides the maximum opportunity for word attack through cues in the text. Strategies for word attack should not be isolated or drilled in unrelated sentences or words, but developed in activities that are an integral part of the reading experience, commensurate with the child's potential and stage of development" (Booth, Booth, Pauli, & Phenix, 1984, p. 15-16).

In view of this orientation toward reading in general and phonics in particular it is not surprising that we were unable to find, in any of the three whole-language programs, exercises of the type described above which emphasize the need for a slow and deliberate approach to phonemic segmentation as well as the need for a gradual introduction to the alphabet. In fact, with respect to the alphabet, in all three programs children are introduced not only to letter sound/letter shape associations from the start but also to a large number of printed words in the form of story books, word charts, personal word banks, and flash cards. Also with regard to the alphabet, in both Networks (lesson 6) and Impressions (lesson 8) all of the upper and lower case letter names are introduced at the same time the children are taught the letter sounds, which is a particularly troublesome practice especially for children with only a limited command of the alphabet at the time of school entry (Stahl, Osborn, & Lehr, 1990).

Given this orientation, what purpose do the phonics exercises serve in whole-language? Unlike the phonics exercises in phonemic awareness programs which prepare children for decoding, the phonics exercises in at least Journeys and Networks are intended largely to provide children with one additional clue to use when they are unable to recognize words either by sight or by some other means. This goal is achieved by focusing the children's attention primarily on beginning sounds rather than on beginning, middle, and final sounds, as is the case in the phonemic awareness programs. Thus, in Networks, when story line and illustrations, which serve as the principal context clues, are not helpful in allowing children to identify an unknown word, teachers are told to have the children make the sound of the first letter (or first several letters) in that word and then return to these context clues in order to "predict" a word that starts with that sound. To confirm the accuracy of their prediction the children are then told to consider the meaning of the resulting sentence with the "predicted" word in place. Because the goal of reading in whole-language is to achieve meaning accuracy rather than word accuracy, only if the sentence fails to make sense in terms of the overall story line would the predicted word be judged incorrect.

To illustrate this procedure as well as to clarify the point that phonics plays only a secondary role in word identification, consider the following example based on material from the Teachers Planning Guide for Networks (McInnes, et al., 1987, p. 183-188). A six

year old child sees the sentence: IT LANDED VERY GENTLY IN THE GRASS. Upon reaching the last word in the sentence the child at first hesitates and then substitutes /GL/ for /GR/ thereby converting GRASS into GLASS. If the story takes place in the fall and the illustration shows leaves drifting from a tree, the child's predicted word (GLASS) would render the sentence meaningless in terms of the overall story line. According to the Planning Guide, however, the teacher is not told to correct the child's use of an improper initial consonant, but instead is advised to encourage the child to pay greater attention to the story line and illustration in order to arrive at a more appropriate word. Thus, if the child had substituted LAWN, MEADOW, TURF, or even PASTURE in place of GRASS, these substitute words would have been considered appropriate despite the total lack of correspondence between the sounds in these words and the sounds in GRASS.

This difference in approach to phonics instruction is even more striking in Impressions which places far greater emphasis on sound/symbol associations than either Journeys or Networks. Although the first forty lessons in Impressions focus mainly on beginning sounds, in the remaining lessons the coverage includes middle sounds, final sounds, blends, digraphs, verb endings, plurals, possessives, and graphemic bases. Moreover, the procedures used to teach this material resemble many of the procedures found in more traditional beginning reading programs. For example, in the Student Activity books, which are an integral part of the Impressions program, there are exercises that range from having children trace dotted letters while pronouncing the letter names to exercises that require children to connect letters and pictures that have common sounds. Teachers also are encouraged to engage children in traditional sound/symbol association games such as Concentration and to make use of flash cards.

In keeping with the quotation from the Impressions program cited above, however, there are no instructions in the Teacher Resource Books on how to help children integrate the knowledge gained from these exercises into the reading process itself. For example, by the time children reach Unit 16 they will have been exposed to 19 initial consonants, 8 final consonants, all of the vowels, the blends /tr/, /gr/, the digraph /th/, the verb ending /ing/, and the graphemic bases /og/, /ot/, /ed/, /un/, /ell/, /et/, /op/. Yet there is no mention in any of the three Teacher Resource Books for the first 15 Units of the need to show children how these sounds might be used to help them identify individual words. In fact, Unit 16, like many of the earlier units in the Impressions program, is introduced as a unit which provides still further opportunities for children to experience rhythm and rhyme as well as predictable sentences that "give children confidence to attack the print" (p. 41). Moreover, there are no sounding out exercises nor are there any blending exercises in the 71 lesson plans that comprise the year-one work. Instead, teachers are referred to other sources where information on these exercises can be obtained. Whether or not they choose to employ this information is left to the teacher to decide (see p. 143-147 in Froese, 1990, for a general discussion of this matter).

Parenthetically, it is also worth mentioning that although independent reading is an important part of every lesson in the Impressions program, this reading always follows a session led by the teacher, of shared reading, choral reading, responsive reading, etc. during which the children often memorize, and sometimes are even encouraged to memorize (see for example Unit 10, lesson 3), the entire reading passage for the day. Thus, how much of this reading is truly independent in the sense that children are exposed to new material for the very first time in order to practice word identification is unclear. In addition, since the reading passages themselves become more difficult throughout the year, as early as lesson 26 children who still are considered to be at the beginning reading stage are no longer expected to engage in independent reading. Therefore as the year progresses, because these children are likely to have far fewer opportunities to read in comparison to their more advanced peers, the gap between the poorer and the better readers could increase even further (for evidence bearing on this possibility see Allington, 1984; Biemiller, 1977/78; Stanovich, 1986).

Finally, it is also worth noting that rhyming too serves a very different purpose in these three whole-language programs. As mentioned above, in the phonemic awareness training programs rhyming is employed as a further means of focusing children's attention on beginning, middle, and final sounds to help them master the process of phonemic segmentation. In each of these programs, however, rhyming is used once again largely as a means of helping children identify and predict words. By way of illustration, in Networks when children find an unfamiliar word they are taught to scan the passage that contains the word and note how the lines in the passage are arranged on the page. If the lines are arranged in stanzas the children know they are reading a poem. If the unfamiliar word appears at the end of one of the lines the children then refer to charts that contain lists of rhyming words. As soon as they find a word on one of the charts that rhymes with the last word on the line above the unfamiliar word, they then "predict" that this must be the word they are seeking. Because only meaning accuracy is relevant, as long as the predicted rhyming word seems appropriate in terms of the overall meaning of the poem, according to the Teachers Planning Guide the children can regard their prediction as correct.

Implications

Although phonics instruction, as claimed in the letter from Alberta Education, is indeed an integral part of the Journeys, Networks, and Impressions programs, the purpose of this instruction is clearly different from the purpose served by phonics instruction in the phonemic awareness training programs. In each of these three whole-language programs phonics instruction merely provides children with one additional context clue (sound) that they then can employ together with other context clues (story line, illustrations, etc.) when

these other context clues, by themselves, are not useful in word identification. In the phonemic awareness programs, on the other hand, phonics instruction offers children an important primary strategy for word identification that can be employed by itself when children find a word with which they are unfamiliar. Since it is generally agreed that it is this latter form of instruction which is critical to the emergence of skilled, independent, reading (see, for example, Vellutino, 1991) it not surprising that, on average, disadvantaged children who are exposed to programs like Impressions, Journeys, and Networks, are more likely to have difficulty reading than children who are exposed to conventional reading programs which contain exercises similar to the ones used in phonemic awareness training programs.

Stanovich (1993/94) recently summarized the consequences of denying children access to these exercises in the following way.

> *"Children who begin school with little phonological awareness have trouble acquiring alphabetic coding skill and thus have difficulty recognizing words. Reading for meaning is greatly hindered when children are having too much trouble with word recognition. When word recognition processes demand too much cognitive capacity, fewer cognitive resources are left to allocate to higher-level processes of text integration and comprehension. Trying to read without the cognitive resources to allocate to understanding the meaning of the text is not a rewarding experience. Such unrewarding early reading experiences lead to less involvement in reading-related activities. Lack of exposure and practice on the part of the less-skilled reader further delays the development of automaticity and speed at the word recognition level. Thus, reading for meaning is hindered, unrewarding reading experiences multiply, practice is avoided or merely tolerated without real cognitive involvement, and the negative spiral of cumulative disadvantage continues. Troublesome emotional side effects begin to be associated with school experiences, and these become a further hindrance to school achievement" (p. 281).*

Unless the ministries recognize and address the concern raised in the position paper, in future years these consequences could be realized in greater numbers of children than ever before. For example, statistics recently compiled by the Research and Assessment Division of the Board of Education in London, Ontario, show a system-wide decline between 1988 and 1991 among fourth grade children in reading comprehension scores coupled with a nearly twofold increase in the percentage of at-risk readers. Although the Board cited a number of factors that may have contributed to these findings, in a press release issued by a Board trustee (Anslie, 1994), one of the major factors mentioned responsible for the findings was the gradual introduction of whole-language into the London school system starting in 1984/85. In line with this point, the director of education for the London school system has also acknowledged that whole-language may not be

appropriate for children in all school districts and, in particular, it may not be appropriate for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Nikiforuk, 1994).

Moreover, in connection with these statistics, it is also worth mentioning that in 1993 close to 22% of the third grade children in London were at risk for reading failure (Research and Assessment, 1994). While it is impossible to know whether this figure is the result of whole-language instruction, it is important to realize that this figure is two to three times higher than the base rate for educational problems at the primary level in the population as a whole as reported in the late 1970s-early 1980s, which of course is prior to the advent of whole-language (Lichtenstein & Ireton, 1984).

In the position paper the Board of Directors called upon the ministries of education to correct the problem of imbalance in the authorized lists of textbooks. In light of the foregoing information, the Board now calls upon the ministries to take the following additional actions before more children are made to suffer the consequences of improper beginning reading instruction.

1) **Change the curriculum guidelines to include the need for phonemic awareness training.**

2) **Encourage Canadian textbook publishers to supplement their whole-language programs with phonemic awareness training exercises.**

3) **Encourage teacher education institutions to provide prospective teachers in the elementary or primary-junior divisions with information on phonemic awareness training.**

4) **Encourage classroom teachers to make use of phonemic awareness exercises during normal reading instruction.**[1]

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[1]Recent findings by Uhry and Shepherd (1993) indicate that when phonemic awareness exercises are used to supplement whole-language instruction in the classroom, children show gains in both speed and accuracy in reading unfamiliar passages as well as in spelling unfamiliar words. Examples of phonemic awareness exercises that are particularly well suited to the classroom can be found in Catts (1991), Clay (1981), Griffith and Olson (1992), Warrick, Rubin, and Rowe-Walsh (1993), and Yopp (1992). There are also a number of commercial programs for teaching phonemic awareness to young children (Adams, Bereiter, Hirshberg, & Bernier, 1995; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1991; Lindamood & Lindamood, 1984; Torgesen & Bryant, 1994a). Procedures to help teachers identify children who are especially weak in this area are given in Ball (1993), Berninger, Thalberg, DeBruyn, and Smith (1987), Mann (1993), and Torgesen and Bryant (1994b)

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